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Rites of Intent: The Participatory Dimension of the City

Nicholas Temple

Introduction

The study of ritual in architecture has recently attracted renewed interest by anthropologists and architectural historians.¹ This attention, no doubt, has been partly a response to a growing recognition of the importance of ritualized space in deepening our knowledge of cultural practices and belief-structures. Important questions inevitably arise from such enquiries about the role architecture has played historically in shaping, even defining, ritual itineraries. Perhaps the most familiar question is the following: To what extent can architecture be understood as ‘frozen ritual’; or to put it another way, when certain religious or civic ceremonies are no longer performed, but their architectural and iconographic legacies remain, can these physical and visual references serve as repositories of the earlier rituals, that can in turn be made legible

¹ See in particular: Lindsay Jones, *The Hermeneutics of Sacred Architecture: Experience, Interpretation, Comparison, Volume One: Monumental Occasions: Reflections on the Eventfulness of Religious Architecture* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2000); Lindsay Jones, *Volume Two: Hermeneutical Calisthenics: A Morphology of Ritual-Architectural Priorities* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2000); Catherine Bell, *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); Roland L. Grimes, *Readings in Ritual Studies* (Prentice Hall, 1995); *The Princeton Journal: Thematic Studies in Architecture, Vol. 1, Ritual* (Princeton, New Jersey: The Princeton Architectural Press, 1983).

in some way?² The question could be likened to an analogous argument that certain period instruments preserve their own musical traditions and heritage, even when that music is no longer performed.³

In this study I do not aim to address this question directly but rather to examine a broader related issue concerning what knowledge and understanding we can gain from examples of the past when considering the question of ritual space today. My reliance here on a comparative method of investigation, to elicit the key aspects of ritual space, draws inspiration from Lindsay Jones' seminal study of ritual in sacred architecture.⁴ The intention of this hermeneutical enquiry is to draw upon examples from the period of Early Christianity to explore the idea of a syncretic 'morphological pattern' of ritual architecture, not however in the sense of the stylistic or formal characteristics of a building, but rather in the inter-relationships between spaces and the actions that take place within them. As Jones states, in the context of sacred architecture, a hermeneutical understanding of ritual space must "of necessity,

² "A ritual implies a near frozen relationship between space and event." Bernard Tschumi, "Sequences", in *Ibid.*, p.34.

³ The notion of sounds that are consonant with the timbre of an musical instrument, residing within the vessel of the instrument's body, has its origins in the Pythagorean idea of the 'music of the spheres' where the universe itself operates as a kind of musical instrument resonating harmonic sounds. See Jamie James, *The Music of the Spheres: Music, Science and the Natural Order of the Universe* (Springer Publishers, 1995).

⁴ Jones, *Hermeneutical Calisthenics: A Morphology of Ritual-Architectural Priorities*, pp.1-13.

be constituted (or problematized) in terms of what I term ritual-architectural events rather than in terms of static constructional entities.”⁵

The Contemporary Situation

In order to set the context of this historical investigation in the contemporary situation I would like first to refer to an episode that took place in 2002. The incident, as will become clear, sheds some light on current attitudes towards the role and meaning of ritual in contemporary architectural practice.

Whilst teaching as an assistant professor at the University of Pennsylvania I was present at a lecture being delivered by Adam Caruso, from the well known British architectural firm Caruso St. John. Following the presentation I asked a question relating to Adam Caruso’s recently completed New Art Gallery project in Walsall, near Birmingham in England. Located at the end of a canal, near the centre of an economically depressed town (in an area of warehouses and factories), the building has been heralded by architecture critics and the profession alike as one of the most important post-war projects in Britain. The Gallery, which houses the Garman Ryan Collection, is considered by many to have the potential to ‘redeem’ the town of its past economic and social failures, by raising the aspirations of its citizens.⁶ Considering the special importance of the New Art Gallery in the rehabilitation of

⁵ Ibid., p2.

⁶ The following is a selection of critical appraisals of the gallery: Peter Allison, ‘Gallery Square in Walsall’ *Baumeister* (Munich: October 2000), pp.46–55; Peter Buchanan, ‘Caruso St John in Walsall’ *Architecture Today* (London: November 1999), Issue 103, pp.20–36; Jonathan Glancey, ‘Nothing is too Good for Walsall’ *The Guardian G2* (London: 12th January 1998), pp.12–13.

Walsall, not just as a cultural facility but also as a catalyst for redefining the city's self-image, I asked Caruso whether the building and its surrounding space could over time acquire a certain 'ritual' purpose for the citizens of Walsall.⁷

Fig.1 External view of the Walsall Art Gallery (Courtesy of Wikimedia Commons, Photo © Andrew Dunn. 2004)

My enquiry was prompted by two observations about the building. Firstly I was struck by the way its dominating presence in the city, and its topographical connections to the surrounding urban terrain, grants the building a quality redolent of the classical notion of *civitas* – or 'civic ordering' – more typically associated with public spaces in Trecento and Quattrocento Italy.⁸ Against a background of ill-conceived urban development in the city, the New Art Gallery takes on a reforming

⁷ As conventional forms of ritual observance, typically expressed in religious and civic spaces, become less prevalent in contemporary life, it seems plausible that new demands and expectations will be placed upon certain public buildings, like the Walsall New Art Gallery, to facilitate alternative forms of collective participation.

⁸ St Augustine's *The City of God* ('De Civitate Dei') provides the most insightful examination of the meanings of *civitas* in relation to *urbs*; between the idea of the community of the faithful and the physical city. For a comprehensive study of the theological and philosophical backgrounds to *civitas* see Peter S. Hawkins (ed.), *Civitas: Religious Interpretations of the City* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1986). In the classical/humanist tradition, *civitas* was more directly related to the concept of the ideal city, in which the Augustinian model was brought into dialogue with the principles of decorum drawn from Cicero and other ancient Roman writers.

role, from which all future urban and architectural proposals could ultimately be judged. Secondly, I suggested that this quality of civic ordering extends to the internal arrangement of spaces, that allows the visitors' encounter with works of art to be partly informed by their spatial (even thematic) relationships to the surrounding urban landscape, as revealed through various window openings in the perimeter spaces.

Departing from the conventions of the gallery/museum as a pavilion, consisting principally of horizontally linked spaces, the Walsall New Art Gallery is designed unusually as a tower, whose arrangement of six floors (of varying heights around a central circulation route) means that the visitor is drawn into an ascending movement, with discernible points of reference both near and distant. In the course of this vertical 'procession', the visitor acquires familiarity with both the city and its collection.⁹ The implication here of a visual reciprocity between art-work and view, orchestrated within the domestically scaled interiors of the Gallery, suggests a correlation between artistic production and urban regeneration. Hence, questions of

⁹ This relationship between view and exhibited work is highlighted in a recent review of an exhibition of the work of Christopher Le Brun at the Walsall Art Gallery. Here, the critic makes the following observation: "From the fourth floor of the New Art Gallery, you get a view of the architectural mix and match of this Midlands city: mosque, parish churches, multi-storey car park, Next, Powerhouse, Asda... Inside, as you examine this 30-year retrospective of the paintings, sculptures and etchings of Christopher Le Brun, you seem to have shifted back in time to a world more familiar to Tennyson, Browning and other 19th-century medievalists." *The Independent* (Arts and Entertainment section), Wednesday, 5th March 2008, 'Christopher Le Brun, New Art Gallery, Walsall' by Michael Glover.

urban ‘renewal’ (*renovatio urbis*) are given contextual bearings through the location and content of individual art-works, a point that is particularly germane to the Garman Ryan Collection which has long been associated with the city of Walsall.¹⁰

There is, moreover, evidence to suggest that the adoption of a vertical structure for the Gallery was motivated by a larger urban vision, which sought in various ways to ‘restore’ – or at least facilitate - the civic life of the city. On the one hand, the decision to limit the footprint of the building on the site was in order to free-up the surrounding urban terrain to create a generous public square that both maximizes the visibility of the building and orientates the visitor towards its monumental entrance.¹¹ At the same time this arrangement was conceived in order to connect, both visibly and spatially, the New Gallery to a medieval church (St. Matthew’s) located at the other end of town to the east, via the principal commercial

¹⁰ The collection, which contains works by eminent 20th century British and European artists including Jacob Epstein, was donated to the city of Walsall by Lady Epstein (Kathleen Garman) in 1973. The creation of a new venue for the collection, and for visiting exhibitions, was motivated by the ideas of Peter Jenkinson, first director of the gallery and client of the project, who fervently believed that art should be a shared experience for all sectors of society. Consequently, the gallery and its art collection *become* the town, acting as a catalyst for restoring civic life. For an examination of *renovatio urbis* in the context of Renaissance Rome see Nicholas Temple, *renovatio urbis: Architecture, Urbanism and Ceremony in the Rome of Julius II* (Abington, Oxon: Routledge, 2011).

¹¹ The public square facing the Gallery was later designed by Richard Wentworth and Catherine Yass.

thoroughfare (Park St, Digbeth and High St) and its old square and market place.¹² Highlighted in an early model of the project, the tower of the Gallery was intended to ‘answer’ to the church spire, thereby serving as a catalyst for a coherent urban/civic structure.¹³

Fig.2 Plan of the central area of Walsall, indicating location of the New Art Gallery (A) in relation to St Matthew’s Church (B) via the ‘processional route’ of Park St, Digbeth and High St. (Drawn by author)

What can be concluded from this investigation of the New Art Gallery is that some form of processional route underlay the project, even if this is not made explicit by the architect; passing from the church to the gallery (via the market-place), the visitor then ascends through the building itself, finally arriving in a triple height restaurant space with elevated views back along the route to the lofty spire of St Matthew’s.

Underlying my interpretation of the building is the principle that certain kinds of spaces, and their ordering ‘equipment’ (furniture, exhibits, framed views etc), invite us to re-orientate ourselves within the city, beyond the immediate confines of

¹² I am grateful to Alun Jones, one of the project architects for the Walsall New Art Gallery, for providing this information about the initial design concept.

¹³ The model was roughly constructed in cardboard with a cut-out of the street and church spire, with the gallery abbreviated in the form of a simple squat tower. As far as I know the model was never published. I am grateful to Alun Jones for this information.

the building. The resulting reciprocity between local and distant, the tactile and the visual, serves as one of the key qualities of ritualised space, as I will demonstrate later in this chapter. At the same time the example of the Walsall New Art Gallery raises the more general issue of whether contemporary architecture can somehow endow ritual purpose, without necessarily the support of traditional ceremonial or liturgical itineraries.

In spite of all the indications of a larger urban processional strategy in the design of the Gallery, Caruso flatly rejected my suggestions, making it clear that no such ritual intention underlay the project. Understood in general terms, Caruso's response to my line of questioning provides an intriguing instance of how contemporary architects are either indifferent or averse to the inference of ritualised space. Operating in a cultural milieu that gives priority to the immediacy of things, as opposed to their latent possibilities, attempts to articulate a hermeneutical perspective of urban space are easily dismissed as 'superstition', for what is otherwise argued as little more than a compositional device. Related to this scepticism is the impact of the modern preoccupation with individual freedom on architectural thought, which problematizes the concept of predestination (or any associated culminating focus). In our modern mastery of space, questions of ritual 'observance' - or obligation to collective participation - are seen as largely antithetical to the desire for unhindered choice and personal fulfilment.

These doubts, however, about the legitimacy of ritual in contemporary architecture reflect as much a misunderstanding of the nature and meaning of the term, as the desire to emancipate architecture from its bearings in the historic city. My argument in this investigation is that it is precisely through a hermeneutical framework that we are able to recognise both the limitations and possibilities of a

participatory dimension of contemporary architecture without which we are left ‘at sea’, relying only on our personal ontology to make sense of our physical surroundings.

Definition and Evocation

It would perhaps be helpful, at this point, to revert to some clear definitions of ritual, given that the term has been variously (even carelessly) applied to a range of different, — sometimes conflicting, —situations and contexts. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, ritual can describe “a prescribed order of performing rites; or a “procedure regularly followed”.¹⁴ In the first definition, rites (or customary observances) become ritualised when they are arranged in a set order that is intended to fulfil some expected outcome. We see this most clearly in the liturgy of the Early Church where the rites of Baptism, Confirmation and the Eucharist were originally performed in sequence as a single ritual so that the observer progresses from being a catechumen, then a neophyte and finally a full participating member of the Church community.¹⁵

The second definition — ritual as recurring procedure — underlines its more typical usage in the modern age, to designate tasks that are regularly undertaken or performed. Put simply, this definition suggests that the repetition of certain prescribed

¹⁴ Della Thompson (ed.), *The Concise Oxford English Dictionary of Current English* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), p1189.

¹⁵ For discussion of the Early Christian rites and their inter-relationships see Jean Daniélou, S.J., *The Bible and the Liturgy* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: Servant Books, 1979).

activities automatically gives them ritualised status in time. This straightforward correspondence however conceals a more complex set of relationships that underlie the development of ritual practices throughout history. To begin with, rituals are not always performed by the same person, as is often the case for example with everyday tasks or chores. Rather, participation in rituals is a shared experience that can involve different people over time, and be associated with specific locations or situations. Moreover, for the ritual to have meaning and integrity, it requires certain efficacious or desired outcomes; from spiritual rebirth and conversion in the Christian rites (referred to earlier) to personal/collective fulfilment in the dramas of civic festivals. In other words, implicit in most rituals is some form of eschatological process, where a previous state of existence is either transformed or renewed.¹⁶

This brings us to perhaps the most important aspect of ritual that concerns its symbolic role as a re-enactment of something; from a primordial event (such as Creation) to more local – place specific – occurrences (such as the scene of a battle or a miracle). Through their re-enactments, rituals perform the crucial task of ensuring continuity of prevailing social systems, belief structures or communities, giving sustenance and purpose to a ‘way of life’. But can the mere repetition of an act have the potential to give it re-enacting status or meaning; or to put it another way, does the act itself, if it is worthy of repetition over a long period of time (and without any claim to an originating meaning), constitute the makings of an exemplary event? We will return to this issue later in the investigation.

More critical perhaps to the present line of enquiry is the purpose of re-enactments in ritual, and why they are important to ritual meaning. This directs us to

¹⁶ For a detailed examination of eschatology in Judeo-Christian testament see Hans Schwarz, *Eschatology* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2001).

arguably the most contentious aspect of ritual, namely its relationship to myth. Examined in Alan Watts' seminal text, *Myth and Ritual in Christianity*, the idea of rituals re-enacting certain mythical events would seem to be untenable in our technological age, where questions of truth are more typically aligned with matters pertaining to facts.¹⁷ However, as Watts reminds us:

“For the word “myth” is not to be used here as meaning “untrue” or “unhistorical”. Myth is to be defined as a complex of stories – some no doubt fact, and some fantasy – which, for various reasons, human beings regard as demonstrations of the inner meaning of the universe and of human life. Myth is quite different from philosophy in the sense of abstract concepts, for the form of myth is always concrete – consisting of vivid, sensually intelligible, narratives, images, rites, ceremonies, and symbols. A great deal of myth may therefore be based on historical events, but not all such events acquire the mythic character.”¹⁸

Outside the realm of abstract philosophical or scientific concepts, and removed from the more narrow and prosaic understanding of history (as a chronology of validated/proven events), myth embodies the world-view of a culture – or what Watts describes as the “inner meaning of the universe and of human life”. This deeper significance goes some way to explaining why certain incidents, that are merely ‘said’ to have occurred in the past (according to folklore or popular belief), have the capacity to shape culture in sometimes profound ways. Like the creation of a crafted

¹⁷ Alan W. Watts, *Myth and Ritual in Christianity* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1959).

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p7.

artefact the formation of a culture is partly accomplished by recurring events that draw upon a particular cultural *topos*.

As Watts further implies, ritual constitutes a symbolic reconstruction of mythical episodes, whereby the various gestures and motions performed by the participants serve to revive – and thereby re-invigorate - the ontological dimension of these episodes. We can see this for example in the underlying cosmological meanings of courtly and religious ceremonies that variously seek to re-affirm a prevailing authority or belief structure.¹⁹

Through the agency of symbol, the meanings of myth can be understood at many levels, from their most concrete experiential level - as a revelation of the forces of divine nature - to their more interpretive level as allegorical narrative. Such an understanding of the relationship between myth and ritual is however remote from our modern sensibility, that seems no longer to possess the kind of mythic structures that informed earlier traditions.²⁰ This is not to say, however, that the radically immanent

¹⁹ See in particular, Douglas Rutledge, *Ceremony and Text in the Renaissance* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1996) and Ernst Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University, 1997).

²⁰ Perhaps the first signs in the early modern world of a move towards 'self-preservation' as a cultural concern can be seen in the Renaissance where notions of *vita activa* (active life) begin to take precedence over contemplative existence (*vita contemplativa*). ".....the invention of the world and the notion of making through utopias, magic, science, art, and the theatre. These are the imaginative elements that characterise the paradigm shift from the Middle Ages to the modern age ushered in by the Renaissance.....The Middle Ages are under the sway of the *vita contemplativa*. In the Renaissance, by contrast, primacy is given to the *vita activa* or the act of making."

culture of modernity is not endowed with some form of mythic dimension. The writings of Georges Bataille, T.S. Eliot, André Breton and James Joyce, and the works of such diverse artists and architects as Pablo Picasso, Marcel Duchamp, Frederick Kiesler and Le Corbusier clearly demonstrate the pervasiveness of this mythical dimension; albeit reflective of a ‘hidden tradition’ rather than one transmitted through the agency of cultural and religious practices and verifiable by means of collective (participatory) experience.²¹ Often inspired by mythological figures and motifs, as we see for example in Picasso’s enduring interest in the minotaur and Le Corbusier’s association with the raven, the modern assimilation of ancient mythology has provided a fertile source for individual creative work in the modern world.²²

As Richard Kearney reminds us, in his recent work *On Stories*, fictive narratives have helped shape our modern history: “...storytelling may be said to *humanise* time by transforming it from an impersonal passing of fragmentary

Giuseppe Mazzotta, *Cosmopoiesis: The Renaissance Experiment* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001), pxiii.

²¹ On the study of myth and its influence on art and literature see in particular Joseph Campbell, *The Mythic Dimension: Selected Essays 1959-1987* (New World Library, 2007).

²² The association of the raven with Le Corbusier is underlined by the architect’s own name; ‘corbeau’ meaning raven in French. On Picasso’s interest in the minotaur see Ralph Goldstein and Barbara Harborne, “Picasso’s Minotaur Series Reconsidered in the Light of Animus and Anima”, in Ralph Goldstein (ed.), *Images, Meanings and Connections: Essays in Memory of Susan R. Bach* (Einsiedeln, Switzerland: Daimon Verlag, 1999), pp.83-103.

moments into a pattern, a plot, a *mythos*.”²³ Kearney uses the word *mythos* here in its original Greek sense to mean a traditional (primordial) story. The capacity, however, of myth to carry shared meanings in the modern age, and thereby give sense to our collective experience of the city, is perhaps more contentious. Against a background of increasing subjectivity in modern thought, and the dominance of technology as the driving force behind social and political order, various attempts have been made in the 20th century to communicate a mythic horizon to a wider public sphere, outside the ‘hermetic’ environments of artistic circles.

One such case, which is often misinterpreted, is Le Corbusier’s Philip’s Pavilion at the World Expo in Brussels in 1958.²⁴ Here, the architect, with the assistance of Edgar Varese and Iannis Xenakis, created an “Electronic Poem”, where the audience was subjected to an intense performance of sound, colour, light and moving images drawn from an array of theatrical and documentary sources. Housed in a complex structure, in the form of intersecting hyperbolic parabolas, this ‘synaesthetic’ exercise, created by the visual and audible effects of electronic media, was an early attempt to create a distinctly modern (technologically driven) theatrical experience where actual and virtual converge. Le Corbusier was no doubt seeking to assign an almost mystical aura to the operations of technology, reminiscent of early modern automata. But in doing so we are presented not so much with a legible ritualised space, given the absence of any explicit itinerary for public involvement (beyond the viewer’s projected presence through the luminary effects of his/her

²³ Richard Kearney, *On Stories* (London: Routledge, 2001), p4.

²⁴ On the Philip’s Pavilion see Marc Treib, *Space Calculated in Seconds: The Philip’s Pavilion, Le Corbusier and Edgard Varèse* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1996).

silhouette), but rather a modern spectacle that seeks to ‘induce’ a form of collective reverie.

This instance of an architectural ‘experiment’ in electronic media highlights both the opportunities and challenges of modern culture when seeking to ‘construct’ spaces for meaningful (memorable) participatory involvement, outside the realms of conventional religious practice. The problem, it seems, of ritualised space in the modern city resides not so much in the absence of a mythic dimension (however fragmentary or obscure this may be), but rather in the impoverishment of forms of architectural settings that can situate these events within the public domain. Perhaps a contributory factor to this impoverishment is what Adolf Loos considered as the “modern privatization of the sacred”, a condition redolent of the dominance of a ‘personal ontology’ (referred to earlier) as the .²⁵

Recognising Benjamin’s search, in his messianic philosophy, for a world redeemed of the spectacle of the commercial city, the experience of architecture and urban space today demands more insight into the hermeneutics of representation (its historical and cultural underpinnings) than that afforded by the random and ephemeral effects of image to entice consumers to purchase goods.²⁶ It is in this context that we should recognise the significance of building projects like the Walsall New Art Gallery - referred to earlier – in their capacity to offer ways of redefining one’s sense of the city as a civic space.

²⁵ Karsten Harries, *The Ethical Function of Architecture* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1998), p367.

²⁶ On Benjamin’s thesis of messianism see John McCole, *Walter Benjamin and the Antinomies of Tradition* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), pp.106-09.

A different situation, however, prevailed in early modern societies. The public's involvement in the ceremonial or festive life of the city assumed some degree of individual or corporate commitment to the prevailing religious/political/social order. Indeed, participation was, in every sense, an outward expression and demonstration of citizenship. This is explored in Richard Trexler's *Public Life in Renaissance Florence*, where the author examines the complex alliances and relationships between citizens and those in positions of power in late fourteenth- and early fifteenth-century Florence.²⁷ He highlights how commercial life was inextricably intertwined with religious observance. As he states: "The pilgrim coming for the indulgence while selling his wares at the market did not lay aside his bargaining techniques when he approached the altar. The city became a center of trade in salvation as it did for material commodities."²⁸ The typical (everyday) situations, therefore, of the marketplace were not seen as operating in opposition to (or in competition with) ritual time - as it pertains to religious and civic festivals - but rather as its necessary temporal context to facilitate corporate redemption.

This historical role of prosaic experience, as a background condition receptive to the appropriations of sacred or civic rituals, has become in the modern world the dominant experience of the city, against which no alternative seems conceivable – at least not from the perspective of the consumer/urban dweller. The rhythms of cyclic time in earlier societies (summarised in Mircea Eliade's expression "the myth of the eternal return"), which once gave order to urban space through civic

²⁷ Richard Trexler, *Public Life in Renaissance Florence* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991)

²⁸ Ibid., p7.

and religious ceremonies, contrast with the unchanging and homogenous spatial-temporal realm of the modern corporate city.²⁹

Ritual Topography

Given this radically different urban condition in the contemporary city it is perhaps difficult for us to appreciate the all-pervading nature of ritual in earlier societies, in particular the manner in which everyday urban life was periodically transformed into an ‘occasioning of time’, brought about by religious/civic observance. This observance however was not restricted to the formal processions within the city - with their ceremonial protocols, territorial limits and rehearsed time-spans - but also extended to broader (less constructed) horizons of experience. Indeed, an intriguing aspect of ritual, as an ontological concern, is its varying degrees of formality and spatial-temporal range. This is implied in St Augustine’s idea that Christian conversion and participation are not simply an affair of formal rituals, but more crucially constitute a life-long pursuit requiring spiritual as well as physical preparation - or *peregrination*.³⁰ The Latin word *peregrinatio* is especially germane here, given that the term connotes the act of ‘roaming’, and was adopted by the Church to refer to the penitent’s pilgrimage to the venerated religious sites of saints and martyrs. However, as applied in Augustinian theology, *peregrinatio* does not initially assume a predetermined destination, but rather a journey that progresses from a state of doubt or uncertainty to one of deep faith and longing. We should understand

²⁹ Mircea Eliade, *Myth of the Eternal Return: Cosmos and History* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2005).

³⁰ St Augustine, *De trinitate libri XV*, F. Dekkers & J. Fraiponts (eds.), (Turnhout: Brepols, 1968), 14.17, p.454.

therefore that the religious pilgrimage involved a twofold journey; a physical procession to distant shrines and religious centres and an accompanying spiritual re-orientation. Recognising that ritual operates at many scales (from a distant geographical destination to an intimate interior), and using different points of reference (from the constellations of the heavens to one's sense of touch), it could be argued that topography constitutes its primary horizon of experience.

The case of the monumental pilgrimage centre at Qal'at Sem'an (the mansion of Simeon) in Syria, dating from 480-90AD, highlights how this idea of ritualized topography provided the setting for revealing St Simeon's particular (and extreme) acts of piety and self-sacrifice. Constructed on the site of the saint's legendary column, on which it is said he remained perched for thirty-six years until his death in AD459, Qal'at Sem'an continues to attract pilgrims from around the world.³¹

Fig.3 Icon painting representing St Simeon Stylites, Anonymous, 1465 (Courtesy of Wikimedia Commons).

The most famous of the so-called "pillar-hermits", Simeon the Elder became one of the most venerated saints in Christendom, having been consulted by emperors and bishops.³² Initially located in an open space, the column, which was rebuilt at

³¹ Jean-Luc Biscop and Jean-Pierre Sodini, "Travaux à Qal'at Sem'an, in *Actes du XIe congrès international d'archéologie chrétienne*, École française de Rome, 1986, vol.ii, pp.1675-95.

³² David T.M. Frankfurter, "Stylites and *Phallobates*: Pillar Religions in Late Antique Syria", *Vigilae Christianae*, Vol.44, No.2 (June, 1990), pp.168-98. S. Ashbrook

various times during the life of the saint to increase its height, could be seen from a great distance. According to contemporary accounts, the saint had a balustrade built around the platform at the top of the column, from which he would give sermons to his devoted followers and survey the surrounding landscape.

Constructed about 20 years after St Simeon's death, the complex of buildings and walled courtyards that surround the column were laid out along the axis of the existing pilgrimage route (the *sacra via*) that extended south from a local village (Deir Sema'an – Telanissos). The principal buildings (assembly halls or basilicas) are arranged in the four arms of a cruciform plan that extend out from a covered octagonal space centred on Simeon's column. This central space served as the terminating focus of the whole complex:

“The plan of the structure....focuses attention dramatically on the monumental and tangible relic of the ascetic's life [the column]....The south arm...would have been the part of the structure first encountered by visitors approaching from the direction of the local village along the main pilgrimage route....Advancing along the road, up the slope, into the monastic compound, through the monumental entrance of the south façade of the cross-shaped building toward the stylite's column, and then, turning

Harvey, “The Sense of a Stylite: Perspectives on Simeon The Elder”, *Vigiliae Christianae*, Vol.42 (1988), pp.376-94.

right past the relic to the altar at the east end of the east arm, visitors moved into increasingly sacred space.”³³

What we encounter at Qal’at Sem’an is a building complex that has evolved out of a pre-existing ritual structure that was already firmly inscribed in the landscape. Hence, Qal’at Sem’an could be considered an example of architecture as ‘frozen ritual’, referred to at the beginning of this chapter, in the way the sequence of spaces recapitulates the various stages of pilgrimage. The exceptional scale, complexity and longitudinal layout of the pilgrimage centre reflected the particular circumstances of Saint Simeon’s religious following and the topographical characteristics of the site. At the same time, the non-orthogonal arrangement of the cruciform plan may have been the result of other external factors not related to the religious practices of Qal’at Sem’an. Located on the top of the so-called Sim’an Ridge, which forms part of an 80 km long geological fault, the deflection of the eastern arm of the cruciform complex (that houses the altar), from 3-9° to the north, may partly be the result of what geologists describe as the “distributed co-seismic or post-seismic deformations” created by the St. Simeon Fault.³⁴

³³ Ann Marie Yasin, *Saints and Church Spaces in the Late Antique Mediterranean: Architecture, Cult, and Community* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p171.

³⁴ A.S. Karakhanian *et al*, “Seismic deformation in the St. Simeon Monasteries (Qal’at Sem’an), Northwestern Syria”, *Tetonophysics*, Vol.453 (June, 2008), pp.122-47.

Fig.4 Plan of the Qal’at Sem’an Complex, Syria, indicating pilgrimage route to St. Simeon’s Pillar and adjacent church altar (Drawn by author after Biscop and Sodoni)

In this combination of man-made and natural influences, Qal’at Sem’an reveals the way ritual procession, architecture, topography, and the effects of shifting geological terrain, contributed to the particular and unique qualities of an Early Christian pilgrimage centre, located in a remote part of northern Syria. We can also appreciate, from the legacy of this extraordinary building complex, how ritual itself would have been experienced as a series of episodes. This could briefly be summarised as follows; 1) firstly from the initial approach road - with the distant (slightly oblique) northerly view of the walled monastery; 2) then the pillar of St. Simeon comes into view along the axis of the south basilica that aligns with the adjoining gated court; 3) the pilgrim then comes into direct physical contact with the monumental column shaft that rises in the middle of the covered octagonal hall; 4) finally the pilgrim processes into the eastern basilica, located slightly off axis from St Simeon’s pillar.

Besides delineating the actual procession to the cult shrine, the pilgrim’s journey should also of course be understood in analogous terms as conveying the penitent’s spiritual transformation to salvation, in the way described earlier in the context of Augustinian theology.³⁵ It must be pointed out however that the pilgrim’s

³⁵ To help us understand how the re-enactment of St Simeon’s own journey to religious piety could be transcribed into a pathway of redemption, a useful source is St Bonaventure’s famous thirteenth-century meditation, *Itinerarium Mentis in Deum*. Bernard McGinn, “Ascension and Introversion in the *Itinerarium Mentis in Deum*”, in

quest for salvation would not be fulfilled by simply visiting the relic of the Stylite saint. He would also have been expected to participate in the Mass of the Eucharist in the nearby south Basilica. Simeon's column therefore becomes not the final destination of the pilgrim's journey but its penultimate stage, at which point the relic prepares the penitent (by its venerated presence) for the central mystery of the Church; the sacrament of the Eucharist. Implicit therefore in Qal'at Sem'an is the conflation of physical (corporate) procession and spiritual (personal) ascent, communicated through the inter-relationships between architecture, topography and ritual.

Fig.5 View of the Pillar of St. Simeon from the main nave of the Basilica at Qal'at Sem'an. Institute for the Study of the Ancient World (Courtesy of Wikimedia Commons)

The construction of the pilgrimage centre and monastery of Qal'at Sem'an, as other pilgrimage sites during the Early Christian and Byzantine periods, comes at the end of a period that has been variously described as the 'Age of Anxiety'.³⁶ Against the backdrop of sustained decline of the Roman Empire, with its political and social unrest, religious syncretism and territorial incursions, eremitic existence emerged as a legitimate alternative to the corruption and confusion of urban life. The resulting

S. Bonaventura 1274-1974 (Collegio S. Bonaventura Grottaferrata, Rome, 1973), pp.535-52. St Bonaventure, *Itinerarium Mentis in Deum*, Cap.V, 1.

³⁶ E.R. Dodds, *Pagan and Christian in the Age of Anxiety: Some Aspects of Religious Experience from Marcus Aurelius to Constantine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

abandonment of the Roman city (*urbs*), and its supporting institutions, was later to form the basis of the monastic tradition of the Middle Ages, with its network of pilgrimage routes across Europe and the Middle East.³⁷ In such circumstances ritual was not just a formal demonstration of religious devotion, but also a vitally important connective tissue that cemented relationships between otherwise isolated communities.

Ritual as Repeated Action

From this examination of religious practice in Early Christianity we can draw a number of important conclusions about the nature and meaning of ritual: firstly, ritual gives both continuity of beliefs or values and ensures a degree of cohesion of a particular social or religious order; secondly, ritual is always grounded in a topography or setting, whether locally (in the form of liturgical or ceremonial responses to particular artefacts within a space such as a religious rite or a meal) or extra-territorially (through the navigation of architectural or topographical features within a landscape or urban space); thirdly, ritual constitutes in some form a re-enactment of a primordial event or significant act.

This last point however requires further clarification, not least when we consider the question of ritual in our modern immanent secular world. The emergence of a largely homogeneous (non-hierarchical) view of space in modernism was accompanied by a desire for greater transparency between public and private spheres, and a new interest in (even veneration towards) domestic life and technological progress. It is apparent how, as a result of this ideological shift, the mere repetition of

³⁷ Henrietta Leyser, *Hermits and the New Monasticism: A Study of Religious Communities in Western Europe 1000-1150* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1984).

everyday acts – whether in the workplace or at home – acquired a certain ritual status; in the sense that repetition allows us to recall previous undertakings, whether through personal memories/histories or certain exemplary historical/fictive models.

We should not overlook, moreover, the impact of the emerging industrial/technological world on the meaning of everyday acts, given that repeated tasks became expressions of a productive and progressive society. But to what extent can industrial production have any bearing on ritual events? Whilst it would be naïve to directly equate mechanised actions with those activities more commonly associated with rituals (where the task in-hand permits some degree of interpretation or personal imprint), the difference is not as clearly self-evident as one would assume, at least from the perspective of artistic intervention or re-interpretation. We need only recognise Marcel Duchamp's erotic machines (in particular the *Large Glass*), as reproductive (ritual) instruments, to appreciate the manner in which forms of mythic narrative can be transmitted to the iconography of machine parts.³⁸

Certain repetitive actions, moreover, have the potential to transform the mundane and forgettable into the exemplary or memorable. David Leatherbarrow implies such a transformation in the context of the everyday meal. Following on from a discussion of the sacramental meal Leatherbarrow makes the following observation:

³⁸ As Octavio Paz makes clear, Duchamp's treatment of the machine is both an exercise in irony and a critique of the modern world where "there are no ideas..... only criticism."(78). Octavio Paz, *Marcel Duchamp: Appearance Stripped Bare* (New York: Arcade Publishing, 1990), p78. Paz further states that Duchamp's irony "...is the element that turns criticism into myth." Ibid., p76.

“But often the meal is only understood prosaically. Though shorter than sleep and longer than a shower, most servings are similarly matter-of-fact. Whether seen as a re-enactment or repetition, each lunch or supper is both a recall and a prompt of others. The meal’s extended temporality complements its levels of disclosure, from tacit to outspoken.”³⁹

This twofold mode of disclosure “from tacit to outspoken”, constitutes one of the richest and most rewarding aspects of ritual activity; by adhering to certain rites or protocols, ritual observance leaves open opportunities for declaration of personal involvement through gestures. The resulting dialogue, moreover, between understood and declared actions are communicated by means of their dimensional settings that draw influence from the surrounding space(s). Again, Leatherbarrow provides an illuminating example of this spatial-temporal field of relationships:

“Yet the stability of the situation is not guaranteed by the objects alone, for the most durable aspects of the layout are the (implied) positions of things that answer to the reach and habits of the bodies around the table, as they variously but systematically follow and diverge from traditional protocols.....Some items may occupy the horizon of the tabletop, which is stratified according to surfaces that are variously clean and polished. Other items may occupy the horizon of conversation, normally at eye level, a horizon of glances toward other diners, pictures on the walls, mirrors, and so on.”⁴⁰

³⁹ David Leatherbarrow, *Architecture Oriented Otherwise* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2009), p124.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p127.

Leatherbarrow's description of the setting of the meal, in which objects - near and far - are brought into union through the manifold gestures and actions of the conversing participants, further underlines my earlier point about the topographical context of ritual, even at the scale of the dining table. Hence, whether disclosed in a landscape, a room, or the surface of a table, the sacramental objects of ritual are brought into a sustained dialogue through the interaction between their various topographical settings and the bodies of the participants present.

Art as Pilgrimage

From this examination of the various aspects of ritual in architecture, from both an historical/hermeneutical perspective and in the context of the prevailing conditions of modernity, I would like to return to the issue - raised at the beginning of this paper - of the role of contemporary architecture in eliciting ritual involvement. By way of comparison to the Walsall New Art Gallery, I will refer to another building that houses works of art; the Galician Centre for Contemporary Art in Santiago de Compostela, by the Portuguese architect Alvaro Siza.⁴¹

Here, we can see how the insertion of a modern art gallery within a pilgrimage city provided opportunities for redefining the notion of ritual in the experience of works of art. Located at the north-east edge of the medieval quarter, just

⁴¹ For a more detailed examination of this building see Nicholas Temple, *Disclosing Horizons: Architecture, Perspective and Redemptive Space* (Abingdon: Routledge Publishers, 2007), pp.150-59.

outside the boundary of the old city wall, the Galician Centre for Contemporary Art is sited adjacent to the Convent of S. Domingo de Bonaval, one of a number of satellite religious communities surrounding the Cathedral of Santiago that serves as a hospice for visiting pilgrims. To the north of the gallery are the remodelled Convent gardens, with their multitude of fountains and water-courses that terrace down to the platform of the museum.

Fig. 6 The Galician Centre for Contemporary Art, looking west from the convent garden with distant views of the spires and domes of the Cathedral of Santiago above the roof-line. (Photo by Claudia Lynch)

The internal arrangement of spaces of the gallery is partly generated by the external topographical conditions. It is as if the location and form of the building amplify the notion of ritual procession, by virtue of its layout and its relationship to the trajectory of pathways of the adjacent terraced garden and the nearby pilgrimage road (El Camino) which enters the city from the north.

The building is conceived as a series of semi-enclosed spaces on various levels, connected by gradually ascending ramps and stair passages. The journey concludes with a roof terrace where works of art are displayed against the backdrop of the city, with the spires and domes of the Cathedral of Santiago visible to the south-west. The topographical relationship between gallery and cathedral (the location of the relics of St James and therefore destination of the famous pilgrimage route) is further underscored by the orientation of an inverted triangular space on the south-west face of the building, the principal entrance side of the building. From this

aperture, wedged between two principal volumes of the building, a perspective field of view is created that encompasses the Cathedral in the distance.⁴²

In the journey therefore from garden, building interior, to roof terrace, the visitor engages in a form of procession that, whilst not constructed in a liturgical or ceremonial sense, raises expectations of some culminating point of reference. This is not dissimilar to the spatial directives of the Walsall New Art Gallery, explored at the beginning of this chapter. Drawn from the ritual significance of the city, the spatial articulation of this procession conceives works of art as ‘prompts’ that enable re-orientation within the building, and in the city at large. Indeed, it seems that the architect saw the experience of art itself as a form of pilgrimage, which draws inspiration from the surrounding topography of Santiago de Compostela.

Fig. 7 Ground floor plan of the Galician Centre for Contemporary Art in the context of adjacent buildings and convent garden (Drawn by author after Siza)

Siza’s project raises important issues about the relationship between architecture and ritual; in particular the reliance on an existing urban landscape, already steeped in religious significance, to reinforce the processional trajectory of spaces in and around the building. This urban context is, of course, rather different from that of Caruso St. John’s gallery in Walsall. The nature of this difference, moreover, tells us something important about the roles that both buildings play in the life of their respective cities. In the case of the Galician Centre for Contemporary Art, the building clearly draws much of its associated meanings from its topographical relationship to the Cathedral of Santiago. As if tacitly acknowledging the traditions of

⁴² Ibid; p155.

the pilgrimage city, and recognising its subservience to the hallowed shrine of St James, the gallery forms part of a constellation of earlier buildings that have historically provided shelter and sustenance for visiting pilgrims. In the case of the Walsall New Art Gallery, on the other hand, we are presented with a building that more self-consciously draws attention to itself by ‘answering’ to the spire of St Matthew’s Church at the other end of town. Courageous in its ambitions to act as a catalyst for urban renewal, the Walsall New Art Gallery serves as both a symbolic and topographical fulcrum of the city in the 21st century.

Notwithstanding these differences, both contemporary galleries demonstrate how questions of ritualised space – even when understood as a latent possibility - can serve as an effective platform for redefining civic and cultural life. In each case, whether intentional or otherwise, the arrangement of art work constitutes an itinerary of visual and corporeal experiences, along a journey that could be likened to the ritual objects of earlier civic and religious ceremonies and whose destination is ultimately the city itself.

Conclusion

What I have sought to argue in this study is firstly the usefulness of comparative historical investigations, in exploring the potential meanings of ritualised space in contemporary architecture. The case of Qal’at Sem’an reminds us of how the participatory dimension of the classical city, which faced a crisis at the end of the Roman Empire, was revitalised by a new redemptive perspective of topography driven largely by the transmission of biblical narratives to actual geographical locations. Secondly, the idea of the participatory dimension of urban life, as a concretisation of exemplary ‘mytho-historic’ models, arguably still pervades the city

today, albeit latently in the often unremarkable - or overlooked - situations of everyday encounter. From these often repeated encounters emerge forms of ritual - different from the rehearsed ceremonies of bygone ages – which continue to provide the ‘glue’ that gives cohesion and meaning to an existing way of life, and at the same time open doors to other potential horizons of collective experience.

Whilst we do not have the kinds of participatory structures, and their ritual itineraries, that once defined the Medieval and Renaissance cities, we have the benefit of an expansive and profound historical knowledge of ritual space (meaningfully framed through the lens of hermeneutics) that can deepen our understanding of urban life. What seems clear from this comparative study is the need for architects, urban planners, politicians, and even event organisers, to be more attuned to this hermeneutical perspective as the basis for a more creative and imaginative engagement with the contemporary city.